

# PROVIDENCE Journal

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## Pete Adamy: Charter schools burden 95%

By Pete Adamy

Posted Jul 6, 2015 at 2:01 AM

The history of American public education is one of sharing the burden of creating an educated citizenry, and we have traditionally agreed to focus on the benefit to the community over the benefit to any single community member. Proponents claim that charters are non-selective public schools, yet their limited scope currently excludes more than 95 percent of our student population.

The original concept of educational charters did not include public school choice, and we need to keep in mind the vision of what a charter is supposed to accomplish. In his 1980 paper “Education by Charter,” Ray Budde, then a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, laid out a vision for giving teachers and schools a way to test innovative methods of teaching in the public schools.

In his original vision, “charters” should be granted to teachers within existing public schools to allow them to try new things that might otherwise be hampered by too much administrative oversight. In exchange, the agreement would be limited in time, with clearly defined, measurable outcomes that could be used to determine the success of the innovation. In essence, it would encourage innovation with minimal, if any, restructuring of the organizational setting.

The main advantage of the idea is the ability to implement a successful innovation on a larger scale, since it would be designed by teachers and put to use in the existing school setting. It would be tested with the same students who could eventually benefit from large-scale adoption, and not a select few who were chosen by a charter school’s admissions lottery.

Consider the Hope Arts Community -- an in-school partnership between the Rhode Island School of Design and Hope High School teachers. Started in 2005, it led to curriculum reform, increased attendance, higher test scores and improved community attitude about the school. After only a few years, the project was scrapped by new Superintendent Tom Brady, who decided that the block scheduling it required was too expensive.

Meanwhile, during the same period, seven new charter schools were opened in the state, three of which were either in Providence or open to its student population, though the number of available seats was, as usual, limited.

While there are certainly pockets of innovation in Rhode Island's charter schools, as there are in most public schools in the state, our charters are not "laboratories of innovation," as some have called them. Rhode Island's charters have simply been better able to implement reforms that researchers have been pushing for decades: smaller class size, more teacher and administrative autonomy, curriculum that is linked across grade levels, increased parental involvement, community outreach, a coherent and consistent mission, etc.

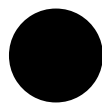
Recent research and our own state testing results suggest that charter schools can help narrow the achievement gap between white and minority students. Rhode Island charter schools appear to be having this impact as well, which can make it seem as if we are addressing this persistent problem.

Unfortunately, the state's charter schools can only have this impact on a very small percentage of this group. Rhode Islanders must not be content to point to the success of charters with a limited population, and must instead figure out how the reforms mentioned above can be successfully implemented in all public schools to the benefit of all students.

It is important to point out that the charter movement has revitalized respect and enthusiasm for schools and teachers, which is a cultural given in countries like Finland, South Korea and Japan. When parents and students feel their school is special (you enroll in the local public school, but with a charter, you win the lottery!), more effort will inevitably be made to achieve success. This is a notable achievement, and significant effort must go into making this happen for all Rhode Island public schools and teachers.

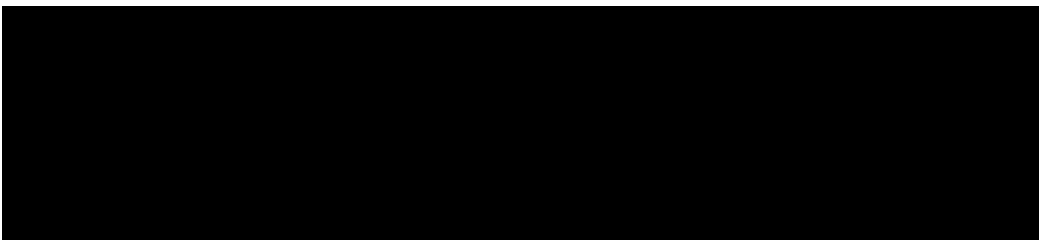
Now that any pending charter school legislation has been put on hold until the next legislative session, Rhode Islanders have an opportunity to pause and consider the best way to move forward. Should we promote an alternative that benefits only a few, or put our efforts toward helping improve the system that serves the 95 percent of students currently excluded from charter schools?

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